

# Putting the Wild back into Wildlife

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SOMEONE asked me when they saw the title of this talk whether I had invented some sort of cattle prod to liven up our somewhat docile wildlife. My answer was no. What I want to talk about is cattle prod strategies to liven up our docile politicians and bureaucrats.

I have a grave concern for the state of wildlife here in Australia and overseas. In this Bicentennial year of European settlement we have the not so envious honour of witnessing more native mammals become extinct than any other country in the world during the same period. If you count the birds that have become extinct on our offshore islands as species rather than subspecies, then we have also witnessed more native birds become extinct than any other country in the world. In our rough estimations there are at least two thousand five hundred rare and endangered plants and animals in Australia, today. These extinctions have primarily been due to the loss or major alteration of habitats. This is clearly reflected in the fact that we lost half our Eucalypt forests and two-thirds of our rainforests. We have dramatically interfered with the flow of most of our inland river systems and have trampled and burnt our arid and semi-arid lands with little remorse.

On a global scale we are witnessing the extinction of a species every day, some would argue that this rate is much higher.

Tropical forests are being destroyed at a rate equivalent in size to the area of Tasmania each year. These forests hold two-thirds of the world's entire population of plants and animals.

So why should we be worried? I once read that the maintenance of the world economy is based on the protection of four biological systems: forests, fisheries, grassland and croplands. All the food we eat, the water we drink, the materials we use for building and a large percentage of the world's energy comes from these biological systems. It seems only good economic sense

that we should endeavour to maintain these biological systems on a sustainable basis. Sadly we are not doing this.

But let me be a little more specific. Many of the medicines and chemical products we use in our homes and industry have their origins in wild plants and animals. Let me show you a few examples. Chloroquin tablets are synthetic drugs used for the treatment of malaria. The original structure of this drug came from quinine which is derived from the bark of the Chincona tree from Central and Southern America. Captain Cook was given this bark to chew by Central American Indians to treat him successfully for malaria. The Donnatab tablet is used for stomach disorders. One of the main constituents of this tablet is the chemical Hyascine which is extracted from the leaves of the Corkwood tree, found in the rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland. The Blackbean seeds, another product of the rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland, are being investigated as a possible form of treatment for AIDS. The brown seaweed that washes up on our beaches contains the chemical algin which is used in all sorts of industrial products such as fire extinguisher foam, paints and dyes and my favourite ice-cream. But plants don't have all the answers. Some extremely important products out of some highly unlikely animals. Medi-creme, an antiseptic creme, contains the chemical Alantoin. This chemical was originally extracted from Blow fly maggots. The safety light used in emergency exits in aircraft comes from combining two chemicals, luciferase and luciferin. These chemicals were originally found in the backsides of fireflies. Australian scientists are looking at coral polyps to see if they can find and reproduce the chemical that protects the polyps from sunburn. Just last week I heard that Australian bullants excrete a chemical which is an antibiotic to the bacterium, Golden Straph, and so the list goes on. As we lose our rainforest and pollute our seas we are losing an enormous potential of genetic material which has limitless values to humans, apart from the fact that they have every right to exist in the first place.



So, what can we do? The obvious answer is to stop frittering our money away trying to protect individual species and start talking about implementing long term strategies to protect ecosystems. It really gets my back up to see so called concerned scientists trotting around the countryside with the aim of generating some six million dollars to develop an antibiotic for koalas. How on earth is anybody going to administer to the wild population of koalas? Besides, no amount of antibiotics will save the koalas unless the habitat is saved.

What we need as a matter of extreme urgency is uniform legislation throughout Australia to protect the habitats of our rare and endangered wildlife. But whenever I say this I get the usual bureaucratic answer: We already have adequate legislation through our system of national parks and nature reserves. To these people I say politely, rubbish! In New South Wales, for example, of the 500 odd identified rare and endangered plant species, only half of these are held in protective reserves. Note that I use the term 'held' rather than 'conserved'. A large percentage of our wildlife is on privately owned land or land leased for private use. While a person may be prosecuted for killing an endangered animal in New South Wales (and fish or invertebrates don't even get a guernsey) a person, government department or company is not liable if they destroy the habitat of that species. Obviously there are major deficiencies in the current system.

In response to this problem Wildlife Survival drafted an Endangered and Threatened Species Habitat Protection Act for New South Wales. We hope that this will provide a model for other States to follow so that we can have uniform ecosystem conservation throughout Australia.

The original concept for this legislation came from my predecessor, Michael Kennedy. Without trying to embarrass him too much, I would just like to say that I believe that Michael is head and shoulders above all of us battling greenies when it comes to devising long-term strategies to conserve wildlife here in Australia and internationally. He is a true visionary.

We contracted Peter Prineas to do our first draft for us. It has since been through a number of developments based on stealing bits from other legislation including the Flora and Fauna Guarantee of Victoria, the Heritage Act of New South Wales and through discussions with Paul Ehrlich and others.

The purpose of the legislation is to basically provide a listing process for threatened and endangered species. The habitats of these species are then determined and afforded special protection. It would be an offence to damage or destroy these habitats. If listed species and

habitats are on private land property owners will be encouraged to ensure that the habitats are protected. They will be given taxing and rating concessions for protecting the habitat and will be encouraged to enter into a habitat agreement to bind the title of the property.

Government departments will be required to supply information and enter into management agreements if any of their activities have the potential to damage a threatened or endangered species habitat.

The government will be able to impose interim habitat protection orders and permanent habitat protection orders if necessary to stop an inappropriate development.

A special corporation will be established to raise money for habitat protection programmes and a State Species Conservation Strategy will be required to be developed.

So far this proposed legislation hasn't been given the support it should. Just prior to the last State election, the then Premier Barrie Unsworth announced that he would be enacting endangered species legislation. Needless to say nothing came of that promise. So far the current Greiner Government has yet to make a similar announcement.

This draft legislation has been with the National Parks and Wildlife Service for close to three years now yet they have done virtually nothing to see it enacted. Sadly there is a disease running through the Service which appears to be impairing the vision of the policy makers. I believe the disease is known as Recreationitis. The employment of recreational consultants a few years back was, I believe, the start of this disease. The Service appears to be no longer concerned with wildlife conservation, preferring to ponder over the intricacies of recreational opportunity spectrums and other such state of the art recreational theories. In the last Budget the Service got an overall increase of funds yet wildlife conservation programmes received a decrease. Maybe the gentleman who is trying to find an antibiotic for koalas could look into finding one for the Service as well. This disease has to be cured very soon before any more species have to become extinct.

Apart from developing legislation for the states we are also keen to see a Commonwealth role in the process of rare and endangered species conservation. We are currently developing guidelines for national endangered species legislation. This would operate at two levels. Firstly it would establish a mechanism for co-operation between all states so that an overall national approach to endangered wildlife habitat protection legislation could be operated. A national focus would hopefully



eliminate expensive state programmes to protect species that are rare in one state yet common in another. The Yellow-footed Rock Wallaby conservation programme has been a classic example of this short-sightedness.

The Commonwealth legislation would have on the ground provisions like the state acts for the areas that are directly under Commonwealth Government control. The Commonwealth Act would be administered by the Endangered Species Unit of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

You may have heard that Senator Richardson recently announced the establishment of this Endangered Species Unit. Sadly this announcement is an absolute sham. We lobbied very hard to get this unit going. Just prior to the last Federal election, the Prime Minister announced that he would be setting up this unit. Barry Cohen, the then Environment Minister, made a similar announcement saying that \$500 000 would be allocated to finance its operation. Today, no money has been given and no new staff positions have been created. It certainly is an Endangered Species Unit!

At the international level, we are trying to instigate a process whereby Australia can contribute to the conservation areas of high biological diversity in developing countries. This may seem a little presumptuous, particularly as we can't get our own act together, but the seriousness of the situation in the developing world dictates that we must direct some of our attention overseas. We are looking at two principal processes for doing this:

Firstly, we are trying to get Australia to take a greater role in the development of an International Treaty to Conserve Biological Diversity. This Treaty is being developed by IUCN (now known as the World Conservation Union) and aims to develop international arrangements for co-operative action in biological diversity conservation in developing countries. IUCNB is developing a funding mechanism based on an international taxing system to be put onto products which have been derived from natural areas of biological diversity. Some of the items I mentioned earlier could be included in the taxing scheme. The revenue gained from this tax would be allocated to developing countries to help them conserve areas of biological diversity.

Our second strategy is to see that Australian aid money doesn't go towards the destruction of natural ecosystems in other countries. Recently the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have come under considerable international criticism for their lack of environmental concern in their projects. Transmigration in Indonesia, cattle ranching in Brazil, dam building in India

are some of the World Bank's environmental disasters. The Asian Development Bank has proposed a wood pulp mill for Nepal. Our bilateral aid money has gone towards destroying mangroves in Fiji, cutting down forests in India and a lot more.

We were part of a delegation which successfully lobbied for a Senate Enquiry into the environmental effects of Australia's aid programme.

Last year the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development called on all governments to address the process of environmental protection and sustainable development within their own country and in their international operations. This report clearly states that not only should we be looking at the environmental impact of aid projects (and we don't even do that in Australia), we should be directing our aid specifically towards projects that sustain the natural resource base. Maintaining the four biological systems is back on the agenda again.

We are very keen to support this process particularly in developing a system to direct aid money towards the conservation of biological diversity in developing countries. We are currently preparing guidelines for legislation entitled Biological Diversity (International Assistance) Act. This is being modelled on recent amendments to the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act.

As I started with a rather gloomy picture I felt I should end with a note of optimism. I am impressed with the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development and believe it could represent a means whereby we can attribute more realistic values to our wildlife so that they are afforded a far higher level of protection. I believe we have some very effective long-term strategies for wildlife conservation which fit nicely into the framework of the UN Report. It now remains up to us to see that these long-term strategies are implemented.

Please go home tonight and get out your cattle prod. Give yourself a little zap first to snap yourself out of your complacency then make some resolution to do something positive to encourage the government into saving the habitats of our wildlife both here and overseas.

If you belong to a society like the Royal Zoological Society give them a bit of a zap with your prod as well. If we added up all the people who were members of the wildlife societies in Australia we'd find a great sleeping giant of concerned citizens just waiting for a good zap to snap them into action. Please consider the strategies I have put forward tonight and try and help us get them implemented.